



## Ethiopia

### International Religious Freedom Report 2005

Released by the Bureau of Democracy, Human Rights, and Labor

The Constitution provides for freedom of religion, and the Government generally respects this right in practice; however, on occasion local authorities infringe on this right.

There was little change in the status of respect for religious freedom during the period covered by this report. Some Protestant and Muslim groups continued to complain that local officials discriminate against them when seeking land for churches, mosques, and cemeteries, but there were reports of good relations between the Ministry of Education and the Ethiopian Islamic Affairs Supreme Council (EIASC) regarding the use of headscarves.

The generally amicable relationship among religions in society contributed to religious freedom. In general, there was a decrease in interreligious conflict and clashes; however, government criticism of some Muslim elements increased. There has been some reported tension between traditionalist Muslims and followers of the Wahhabi sect, an interpretation of Islam that reportedly receives support from Saudi Arabia.

The U.S. Government discusses religious freedom issues with the Government as part of its overall policy to promote human rights.

#### Section I. Religious Demography

The country has an area of 472,000 square miles, and its population is approximately 70.5 million. An estimated 40 to 45 percent of the population belongs to the Ethiopian Orthodox Church (EOC); however, the EOC claims 50 percent of the country's total population, or more than 31 million adherents, and 110,450 churches. The EOC is predominant in the northern regions of Tigray and Amhara.

Approximately 45 percent of the population is Sunni Muslim, although many Muslims claim that the actual percentage is higher. Addis Ababa, the capital, has approximately one million Muslims, according to the Supreme Islamic Council. Islam is most prevalent in the eastern Somali and Afar regions, as well as in all the major parts of Oromia in the south.

Christian evangelical and Pentecostal groups continue to be the fastest growing faiths and are believed to constitute more than 10 percent of the population. According to the Evangelical Church Fellowship, there are 11.5 million Protestants, although this figure may be high. Established Protestant churches such as Mekane Yesus (with 4.2 million members—reporting an increase of 200,000 members each year) and the Kale Hiwot followers (with about 4.6 million members) are strongest in the Southern Nations, Nationalities, and People's Regional State (SNNPR), western and central Oromia, and in urban areas. In Gambella in the west, where ethnic clashes broke out in 2003, Mekane Yesus followers represent 60 percent of the population, according to the President of the Ethiopian Evangelical Church of Mekane Yesus. The Evangelical Church Fellowship claims 22 denominations under their religious umbrella and that the number of adherents increased by 200,000 during the period covered by this report.

There are reportedly more than 7,000 Jehovah's Witnesses in the country. Oriental Rite and Latin Rite Roman Catholics (Roman Catholics number approximately 500,000), Jews, animists, and other practitioners of traditional indigenous religions make up most of the remaining population. In Addis Ababa and western Gondar, in the Amhara region, some claim that their ancestors were forced to convert from Judaism to Ethiopian Orthodoxy (Feles Mora) many centuries ago. There are very few atheists. Although precise data is not available, active participation in religious services is generally high throughout the country.

A large number of foreign missionary groups operate in the country. Protestant organizations, operating under the umbrella of the 22-member Evangelical Church Fellowship of Ethiopia, that sponsor or support missionary work include: the Baptist Bible Fellowship; the New Covenant Baptist Church; the Baptist Evangelical Association; Mekane Yesus Church (associated with the Lutheran Church); Kale Hiwot Church (associated with SIM--Service in Mission); Hiwot Berhan Church (associated with the Swedish Philadelphia Church); Genet Church (associated with the Finnish Mission); Lutheran-Presbyterian Church of Ethiopia; Emnet Christos; Muluwongel (Full Gospel) Church; and Messerete Kristos (associated with the Mennonite Mission).

Pentecostals, Jehovah's Witnesses, and the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (Mormons) also have active missionary operations.

## **Section II. Status of Religious Freedom**

### **Legal/Policy Framework**

The Constitution provides for freedom of religion, and the Government generally respects this right in practice; however, on occasion local government authorities infringed on this right. The Constitution requires the separation of state and religion and prohibits a state religion, and the Government generally respects these provisions in practice. In 2003, the Federal Government interfered in the internal affairs of the EIASC by orchestrating the installation of EIASC officials following an internal power struggle.

The Government requires that religious groups be registered. Religious institutions, as with nongovernmental organizations (NGOs), are registered with the Ministry of Justice and must renew their registration every 3 years. Churches must also re-register every 3 years. The Ethiopian Human Rights Council (EHRCO) stated that this registration requirement reflects a lack of progress or improvement in the Government's treatment of "newer religions," specifically Protestant churches.

The EOC has never registered and has never faced ramifications for not registering. Similarly, the Supreme Islamic Council, after registering 8 years ago, has never re-registered since it protested this requirement to the Prime Minister's Office. Protests from other religious groups over these exceptions have not resulted in equal treatment from the Government. The Roman Catholic Nuncio in the country has written repeatedly to the Prime Minister's office seeking equal treatment before the law. Mekane Yesus, the Evangelical Fellowship, and Roman Catholics believe that religious churches should be placed in a "different status than NGOs." However, there was no change in the government policy during the period covered by this report.

Unlike NGOs, religious groups are not subject to the Government's rigorous registration process. Under the law, any religious organization that undertakes development activities must register its development wing separately as an NGO with the Ministry of Justice. To register, each religious organization must complete an application form and submit a copy of its bylaws, curriculum vitae of the organization's leader, and a copy of the leader's identity card. A group's failure to register results in a denial of legal standing. For example, any organization that did not register with the Ministry of Justice would not be allowed to open a bank account and would be severely disadvantaged in any court proceeding.

Religious groups are not accorded duty-free status. Religious groups are given the free use of government land for churches, schools, hospitals, and cemeteries; however, schools and hospitals, regardless of how long they have been in operation, are subject to government closure and land forfeiture at any time. Religious groups, like private individuals or businesses, must apply to regional and local governments for land allocation. An interfaith effort to promote revision of the law for religious organizations to obtain duty-free status continued.

After complaints that mosques built by squatters had been demolished in 2003, the Addis Ababa Municipality appears to have suspended plans to demolish other mosques built illegally by squatters.

In most interreligious disputes, the Government maintains neutrality and tries to be an impartial arbitrator. Some religious leaders have requested the establishment of a federal institution to deal with religious groups; however, no action had been taken to establish such a federal institution by the end of the period covered by this report.

The Government has interpreted the constitutional provision for separation of religion and state to mean that religious instruction is not permitted in schools, whether they are public or private. Schools owned and operated by Catholic, Orthodox, evangelical, and Muslim groups are not allowed to teach religion as a course of study. Most private schools teach morals courses as part of their curricula, and the Government Education Bureau in Addis Ababa has complained that such courses are not free of religious influence. Churches are permitted to have Sunday schools, the Qur'an is taught at mosques, and public schools permit the formation of clubs, including those of a religious nature.

The Government officially recognizes both Christian and Muslim holy days and continues to mandate a 2 hour lunch break on Fridays to allow Muslims to go to a mosque to pray. Recognized Christian holy days include Christmas, Epiphany, Good Friday, and Easter. Muslim holy days recognized are Eid al-Adha (Arefa), the Prophet Mohammed's birthday, and Eid al-Fitr (Ramadan). The Government also agreed to a request from Muslim students at Addis Ababa Commercial College to delay the start of afternoon classes until 1:30 p.m. to permit them to perform afternoon prayers at a nearby mosque.

The Government has taken steps to promote interfaith understanding by including religious leaders in major societal campaigns. In launching the National Partnership Forum against HIV/AIDS, all principal religious leaders were present in the forum organization, and at the 2004 National rollout of anti-retroviral treatment leaders from across the religious spectrum were present. No interreligious exchanges were conducted during the period covered by this report.

### **Restrictions on Religious Freedom**

The Government bans the formation of political parties based on religion. There are no religious political parties in the country, and the ban has never been tested in practice.

The Government does not issue work visas to foreign religious workers unless they are attached to the development wing of a religious organization licensed by the Government. However, this policy is not consistently enforced for Muslims or Orthodox Christians. The Government requires religious organizations to separate their development activities from their religious ones and imposes different licensing processes for each. The Government issued licenses for religious organizations' development activities in the period covered by this report but not for their religious activities. Licenses are required for all religious groups, domestic and foreign. The Ministry of Justice denied a license to at least one traditional Oromo religious organization, called Wakafeta, for unspecified reasons, presumably because the Government suspects the group of collaborating with the outlawed Oromo Liberation Front. The EIASC oversees the activities of foreign imams and screens out perceived Wahhabi influence.

Under the Press Law, it is a crime to incite one religion against another. The press law also allows defamation claims involving religious leaders to be prosecuted as criminal cases. In 2001, the Government filed defamation charges against two journalists after they wrote articles critical of the EOC. Their cases were pending at the end of the period covered by this report. The EHRCO reported that no journalists had been detained or charged during the reporting period with inciting religious groups or with defamation of religious leaders.

Evangelical leaders have complained that, in general, regulations on the importation of Bibles are too strict and that customs duties on Bibles and other religious articles are excessive; however, Bibles and religious articles are subject to the same customs duties as all imported books, donated or otherwise. Continuing discussions between the Government and the Ethiopian Evangelical Church of Mekane Yesus yielded progress on this issue and during the reporting period Parliament passed a proclamation lifting taxation on imported books and printed materials, effectively addressing this issue.

While some Muslim leaders complained in the past that public school authorities sometimes interfered with their free practice of Islam because they prohibited the wearing of headscarves in schools, they reported that the Ministry of Education (MOE) has accepted the practice of wearing headscarves in schools not only in Addis Ababa but in regional areas as well. In the Southern Nations, Gondar, and Dire Dawa, there have been scattered problems concerning headscarves in schools but the local Islamic Council has addressed them. An understanding was reached between the MOE and the EIASC that female Muslim students could use headscarves but not the hijab. The EIASC does not support the wearing of hijabs, which it claims is a tradition from the Middle East, but not one required by the Qur'an. The EIASC reportedly maintains a non-restrictive policy of adherence to traditional Islamic dress codes, and it noted an incident in Gondar during the reporting period in which a Muslim nursing student refused to remove her hijab while attending to patients. Local religious leaders were called, and the dispute was resolved to the satisfaction of all parties.

Minority religious groups have complained of discrimination in the allocation of government land for religious sites. Protestant groups occasionally complain that local officials discriminate against them when the groups seek land for churches and cemeteries. Evangelical leaders have complained that because they are perceived as "newcomers," they remain at a disadvantage in the allocation of land compared with the EOC and the EIASC.

The EIASC has complained that it has more difficulty than the EOC obtaining land from the Government; others believe that the EIASC is favored for mosque locations. Local authorities in the northern town of Axum, a holy city for the EOC, continued to deny Muslim leaders' repeated requests to allocate land for the construction of a mosque, even though the Constitution provides for freedom to establish institutions of religious education and administration. Tigray regional government officials choose not to interpret this provision liberally in the town of Axum, and the Federal Government has not overruled the regional officials' interpretation. Muslims have had access to land since the country became a republic in 1995. In 2003, a group of Muslims attempted to build a mosque in Axum, but it was torn down by a local mob because it was built without permission from the regional government. Local officials ordered the Muslim community not to resume construction.

The EIASC also raised concerns about the equitable celebration of religious holidays in the country, noting Orthodox Christian holy days such as Meskel and Epiphany are celebrated in Meskel Square and Jan Meda, two large gathering points in Addis Ababa. The EIASC complained that the celebration of Eid al-Fitr had been relegated to the Addis Ababa stadium, which they do not consider a prominent site. EIASC has asked the City Council of Addis Ababa for land to build a venue for this celebration. The request was pending at the end of the period covered by this report.

Members of the Jehovah's Witnesses have stated in the past that they have leased their own plots of land in the capital, due to lack of suitable properties available from the Government. They have also purchased buildings to use as places of worship throughout Addis Ababa. In a few places in Oromiya plots have been provided free of charge to religious groups to build places of worship.

In 2003, the Meserte Kristos/Mennonite Church reported that it was deprived of its property without due process or compensation. The Derg regime had seized their church and church school many years ago. Although the church was able to reclaim its place of worship after the Derg fell from power, the adjacent Sunday school building was converted to a government school. After the church received a letter in 2003 stating it had to vacate the premises of its place of worship as well, the Government seized the building to use as part of the government school on the same compound. The government defends its action under existing legal mechanisms for seizing property.

The Government has not returned other properties to the Mekane Yesus Church that had been seized under the Derg regime, including three student hostels and two schools. The Mekane Yesus leadership stated that these issues were still pending. The church has attempted to repossess the Sidist Kilo hostel building for 17 years with no resolution. Only the headquarters building has been returned to the church, and ownership of the remaining property is yet unresolved. Providing adequate space for churches within Addis Ababa continued to be a major issue among Protestant groups. They noted that the Orthodox Church has built at least 20 churches between September 2003 and July 2005, but no other groups have been able to construct new edifices.

The Government also has not returned the Seventh-day Adventist properties taken by the Derg regime, including two hospitals. The Supreme Islamic Council continued to try to obtain properties outside of the capital that were similarly confiscated. In Addis Ababa and Oromia, structures have been returned under federal provisions; however, edifices under regional statutes have yet to be returned. There is a precedent and a perception that the Government favors the EOC, yet government officials state that there is no discrimination.

A 2002 declaration by the Oromia Regional State Parliament called for the return of all nationalized property originally belonging to religious organizations; however, no property was returned by the end of the period covered by this report.

### **Abuses of Religious Freedom**

Two men charged with the 2002 murder of Full Gospel Church leader Pastor Demtew remain in prison while their trials continue. The pastor was killed when a mob of EOC priests and other adherents forcibly entered his home at night.

In another instance, while apparently not religiously motivated, the killing of a Muslim man by a Protestant, who authorities have prosecuted for the murder, has been reported as "martyrdom" on a few websites.

There were no reports of religious prisoners or detainees.

### **Forced Religious Conversion**

There were no reports of forced religious conversion, including of minor U.S. citizens who had been abducted or illegally removed from the United States, or of the refusal to allow such citizens to be returned to the United States.

### **Abuses by Terrorist Organizations**

There were no reported abuses targeted at specific religions by terrorist organizations during the period covered by this report.

## **Section III. Societal Attitudes**

The generally amicable relationship among religions in society contributed to religious freedom; however, some minor conflicts between religious groups continued. These occurred most noticeably between Ethiopian Orthodox Christians and evangelical Protestants, and between Ethiopian Orthodox Christians and Muslims. In addition, there continued to be pockets of interreligious tension and criticism between some other religious groups.

According to EHRCO, while the Government allows for freedom of religion, the EOC has tried, under the Patriarch, to consolidate its power and strengthen its influence. For example, members of newer faiths, such as Pentecostals, have encountered overt opposition from the public while proselytizing that has required police intervention to protect them. Muslims and Orthodox Christians report proselytization by Pentecostals and Jehovah's Witnesses. Ethiopian Orthodox leaders report that sometimes Protestants fail to respect Orthodox holy days and customs. Muslims report that some Pentecostal preachers disparage Islam in their services. There were complaints by some Muslim and Protestant leaders that the EOC's desire to show its dominance sometimes caused irritation in the religious community.

In most regions, Orthodox Christians and Muslims generally respect each other's religious observances, and there was tolerance for intermarriage and conversion in certain areas, most notably in Welo, in the Amhara region, as well as in urban areas. The challenge of Wahhabism and its lack of tolerance for others have disturbed the more traditional Ethiopian Muslims of the present EIASC. Members of the EIASC state that Wahhabists believe in supremacy and do not tolerate interaction between Muslims and Christians. The majority of Muslims continued to enjoy good relationships with their neighbors, attending cross cultural and religious ceremonies such as weddings and funerals. The local Wahhabists shun this type of social mixing.

During the reporting period, the EIASC expressed concern over increasing external Wahhabi influence within the Muslim community. The EIASC noted that money was flowing into the country allegedly through Saudi funded travel agencies, and that its concern over external non-Ethiopian Islamic influences was growing.

In Addis Ababa, the capital, persons of different faiths often live side-by-side. Most urban areas reflect a mixture of all religious faiths. The Roman Catholic Church and evangelical Protestant denominations, particularly the Mekane Yesus Church and Kale

Hiwot Churches, provided social services such as health care and education to nonmembers as well as to members.

Leaders of the EIASC struggled with Wahhabist fundamentalism within their ranks. In January 2004, the Council voted to remove all executive members, and staunch anti-Wahhabists were elected to fill the top leadership positions. A Ministry of Foreign Affairs representative attended the election sessions to demonstrate the Government's interest in the issue. Additionally, the EIASC expressed concern over the prospect of Wahhabists gaining seats on the Council.

No action has been taken by police officials or the local administration regarding the 2003 beating of church worshippers in Kotebe.

No action has been taken against those responsible for the 2002 beating of evangelical believers in Gurage zone.

In May, religious institutions deployed 1,554 of their members throughout the country to observe the national election. The EIASC deployed 558 observers, Protestant denominations deployed 607, the EOC deployed 359, and the Catholic Church deployed 30. On June 9, 2005, leaders of religious organizations including the EOC, EIASC, Evangelical Church of Mekane Yesus, and the Catholic Church made a call for peace following the bloody demonstration the previous day in Addis Ababa. They called upon everyone involved to be patient and present their demands in a peaceful manner.

In November 2003, in the Buta Jira area (Silte Zone) a Protestant family buried a child in a local cemetery. Muslims reportedly dug up the body at night and dumped it in town. The family reported the incident to the local police and zonal administration, but reportedly authorities took little action to resolve the case. Evangelicals claim that they are not able to bury their dead in cemeteries given to them by the Government because Muslims and Orthodox prevent it. In Harar, Evangelicals also were not able to bury their dead in the same cemeteries used by Orthodox and Muslims. Local and regional governments assign burial plots to various faiths. However, isolated incidents occur and in such instances, local government officials generally address the problem.

#### **Section IV. U.S. Government Policy**

The U.S. Government discusses religious freedom issues with the Government as part of its overall policy to promote human rights.

The U.S. Embassy has encouraged the Government to ensure that no religious groups are channeling funds through the country to finance terrorist goals. Embassy officials also made an active effort to visit all of the religious groups and faith-based NGOs during the period covered by this report. The Embassy paid close attention to attempts by Wahhabist elements to exert their influence over the EIASC and discussed the matter with government officials.

The U.S. Ambassador continued to hold regular meetings with religious leaders around the country. The Embassy hosted an Eid al-Fitr dinner for Muslim leaders in November 2004, and a dinner for Muslim leaders in the month of Ramadan.

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[International Religious Freedom Report Home Page](http://www.state.gov/g/drl/rls/irf/2005/51472.htm)